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SUBJECT: SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN FOREIGN POLICY UNLIKELY AT
VIETNAM'S PARTY CONGRESS

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HANOI 00000791 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Vietnam's foreign policy evolution, a gradual process, is not likely to see any sharp changes or surprises at the upcoming 10th Party Congress. Instead, we will see an elaboration of existing policy, with efforts to improve relations with neighboring countries (ASEAN), maintain balance in the relationship among Vietnam, China and the United States and increase Vietnam's participation in international and multilateral diplomacy. Over time, the most remarkable development has been the change towards foreign policy pragmatism in leadership thinking and away from Communist dogma. End Summary.

Background on Vietnam's Foreign Policy Evolution

¶2. (SBU) Over the last twenty years, Vietnam's foreign policy has reflected the "evolving progressive thinking" of Vietnam's leadership as the country has passed rapidly through different periods of political development, according to Ta Minh Tuan, Deputy Director of the Center for European and American Studies at the Institute for International Relations (IIR), the leading training and research academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Vietnam initiated its "Doi Moi" (renovation) policy during the 6th Party Congress in 1986, where it focused primarily on relations with the former Soviet Union and considered that nation the cornerstone of Vietnam's foreign policy.

¶3. (SBU) Two years later, the Politburo adjusted the country's foreign policy to respond to the "new situation" emerging from the 1986 decision to liberalize the domestic economy, shifting away from a dogmatic alliance with the Soviet Union and towards a new policy of "more friends and fewer enemies." During this period, the policy was to co-exist in peace with China, ASEAN and the United States. At the 7th Party Congress in 1991, Vietnam again shifted its focus, this time to consolidating its relations with Laos and Cambodia and speeding up normalization with China. Five years later, at the 8th Party Congress, Vietnam reaffirmed that it sought to strengthen relations with its neighbors, ASEAN members and "traditional friends." Not until 2001, at the 9th Congress, did the Government of Vietnam announce its current foreign policy, which the Party calls "independent and self-reliant diversification and multi-lateralization of international relations," and which the Vietnamese man-on-the-street calls the "friends with everyone" policy.

¶4. (SBU) This evolution of Vietnamese foreign policy from

lockstep agreement with the Soviet Union to the current "friends with everyone" policy reflects pragmatism in the GVN leadership and a desire to integrate Vietnam internationally, in contrast to a policy based on adherence to international Communist doctrine, according to Dr. Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa, an expert at the Communist Party History Journal, a monthly publication of the Ho Chi Minh Political Academy, the Party's top think tank.

10th Party Congress: An Opportunity to Reaffirm and Develop Existing Foreign Policy

¶5. (SBU) The 10th Party Congress will "reaffirm and deepen the country's strongly supported foreign policy," Ta Anh Tuan said. Vietnam's current motto is "Vietnam wants to be a friend and reliable partner with all nations in the international community, striving for peace, independence and development," he explained. The Foreign Ministry was confident enough that Vietnam's foreign policy will stay consistent that Foreign Minister Nguyen Dzy Nien provided a foreign policy forecast for 2006 during February's Lunar New Year celebrations. He said Vietnam will focus on four areas, including: (1) the continued development, on the basis of equality and mutual benefit, of stable and long-term relations with "neighbors and great powers;" (2) enhanced efforts for international integration and accession to WTO; (3) the successful hosting of APEC; and, (4) continued implementation of the Government's Resolution 36 concerning building relations with overseas Vietnamese.

¶6. (SBU) Separately, Nguyen Thiet Son, Director of the Institute of American Studies (IAS), and Colonel Tran Nhung, former foreign affairs editor of Quan Doi Nhan Dan ("People's Army") Newspaper, explained to us that, with the Government's foreign policy "not open to debate," the 10th Party Congress will serve only to reaffirm its continuity,

HANOI 00000791 002.2 OF 002

rather than creating any unexpected reversals. The draft Political Report of the 10th Congress pledges that Vietnam will "expand its consistent foreign policy in the format of diversification and multi-lateralization of relations, which was first introduced during the 7th National Party Congress in 1991" (reftel). According to the Political Report, the mission of Vietnam's foreign policy is to maintain peace and stability. This means that Vietnam has to create and maintain peace and stability not only with China, but also with Laos and Cambodia to ensure a buffer zone for the country, according to Ta Minh Tuan from IIR. "People tend to underestimate Laos and Cambodia as small countries, but they are vital for a stable Vietnam," Tuan added.

The GVN's Foreign Policy Priorities in 2006 and Beyond:
Consolidate Regional Relations; Balance China and the United States; Elevate Vietnam's International Standing

¶7. (SBU) Vietnamese leaders love their proverbs. Explaining that, in spite of its "friends with everyone" policy, Vietnam still has to prioritize its efforts, Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan said in a press article in Nhan Dan ("People's Daily") Newspaper on November 14, 2005 that "nearby neighbors are even more valuable than far away relatives." Vietnam, he explained, attaches importance in its current foreign policy to building and consolidating its relations with neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, and those in the Asia-Pacific region. Regardless of what the 10th Party Congress affirms or doesn't affirm, Vietnam will have to balance and enhance its relations with China and the United States among others, multiple senior sources confirmed.

¶8. (SBU) Vietnam understands that "the grass suffers when the elephants fight," and so it requires tough calculations for Vietnam to masterfully balance its relations with both

China and the United States, according to IIR DDG Dr. Hoang Anh Tuan. However, Nguyen Thiet Son from IAS said separately that in the short to medium term, there will likely be more "breakthroughs" in U.S.-Vietnam relations than in China-Vietnam relations. History has taught Vietnam enough about "not getting too close or too far with China," said the researcher. There is a lot more room for progress in U.S.-Vietnam relations in the future, he added.

¶9. (SBU) Another priority is to "elevate Vietnam's image and position" in the international arena, according to according to Nguyen Quoc Dung, a senior MFA officer now attached to the APEC Secretariat. To do this, he said, Vietnam will have to prove that it is not only a reliable partner, "but also an active and responsible member of the international community." A successful APEC would be good evidence, he noted. In an interview with Ha Noi Moi ("New Hanoi") newspaper, Foreign Minister Nien said that Vietnam's WTO accession, its hosting APEC and its candidacy for non-permanent membership in the 2008-2009 UN Security Council are all designed to elevate Vietnam's international position.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Vietnam is a highly stable and predictable political environment where sudden, arbitrary changes in foreign policy are unlikely. Vietnamese leaders like to do things incrementally, and so any moves are likely to be gradual. Traditionally, Party congresses in Vietnam are opportunities for changes in domestic issues like personnel or economic development policy, and changes in foreign policy are necessarily derivatives of those issues. For the immediate future, Vietnam's foreign policy experts expect that Vietnam will want to do more with the United States, thus tying its foreign policy decisions to its national economic interests. End Comment.

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